

"And are still," she replied, "the truest friends."

"Why are you not dancing?" he asked after a pause.

"At first because I was tired with singing, and now because it is a waltz in which I never take part.

"Your sisters I believe do?" he replied.

"No, none except Mrs. Livingstone, and the two girls sometimes together, mamma does not permit us, but Cora of course does as she likes."

"I am glad you do not like it," he said gravely, "but I knew you did not. Shall we seek a cooler place in yonder shaded conservatoire? I should like to tell you something of my Eastern travels, you used to have a penchant for all that belonged to the land of the Saracens." And taking his arm they walked away together, they who had once loved so fondly. Lela's kiss upon my cheek when she went to her room, told me better than words, of the sad weary heart within, yet she was calm.

"But Cora's arms flung round me, and her hot kisses rained upon my face, told how she needed the comfort she would not take. Marion and I have talked her strange, unnatural conduct over, and concluded it is best she should have had her will; indeed I doubt whether she would submit to any opposition, however gently urged.

To-night she met him at the opera, and they say talked as freely and carelessly to him as to the other strangers.

"And mamma," says May, "Stuart and I both think Mr. Marstone is very much pleased with Gracie; would it not be a wonder if plain little Gracie should make such a conquest as that finished gentleman and scholar; we used to think he liked Lela you know."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

MARCH.

Two more months have passed in a round of never-ending gaiety and excitement. I wonder how they can endure it!

Clare's great picture has taken the prize at the "Exhibition." I need not attempt to describe what he has already done so admirably. Howard stands in the midst, the young Benjamin, with the coat of many colors, the same which his brother once wore about him. It looks like an angel's face shining out in the midst of those dark, stern men who surround him.

Clare's health has suffered sadly on account of his application, and his uncle has determined that he and Howard shall go on a journey to the Holy Land, and wherever else they will, to recruit. It will be sad parting from them, but it will be good for both of them, for Clare is worn out, and Howard is never strong.

Stuart and Marion left us some weeks since and are now quietly living in the old town of "Heidelberg," and Stuart is hard at his books once more, they have taken Ada to stay with them, until I go to Marion, which I shall soon.

Adèle's eyes seem quite well now, but we are very careful of them, especially Gracie who makes her sister sit hour after hour with them closed, telling her:

"I will be your eyes for a while, sister mine."

Cora meets Mr. Livingstone abroad, but of course he never comes here. I have not seen him since that first night, but they tell me he is sadly changed. The rest meet him as she desires them to do, as they would any other stranger.

Mr. Marstone visits us constantly, indeed so fond is Mr. Audley of him that he presses him into service upon all occasions, but Gracie, not Lela, is his companion, and often by Mr. Audley's arrangement I imagine.

"I would rather the child married him, than any man living," he says.

"But why Gracie, more than the others?" asked Estelle, carelessly.

"Oh only because he seems to have taken a fancy to her,

for I confess it was once the hope of my heart, that Lela would give him to me for a son," and his voice trembled, "but she would not."

MAY.

We were all engaged to spend a couple of weeks at the chateau of M. Lambert, and even I had agreed to go, very unwillingly I confess. It is a beautiful spot twenty miles or more back of Paris, and one of the gayest parties of the season was to accompany us down. What a place for me!

But now thanks to May, our journey is to be delayed until later, if we go at all, which I trust will be the case.

A letter from Stuart summoned me to May's side, but when with as much haste as possible I arrived, it was to be folded in "Arty's" arms, and hear this greeting, while his face shone with happiness:

"Too late sweet mother, too late for anything but to welcome our son," and, foolish fellow, he burst into tears.

Then when I had done petting him, I followed him to where my darling lay; bending over her he said softly:

"My own, our mother has come at last."

"Dear mamma, I am so glad, please kiss me," she murmured.

How fair she looked, I thought of her that Christmas morning when she stood beneath her own roof-tree a bride. Now so very weak but so proudly she lay with this new and holy motherhood upon her, and I knelt and blessed my child.

We have called him Audley. Walter was too dear a name.

"And Percy must be always left for Lela," said good little Marion.

They would have twisted Bertha into a boy's name but I bade them not. I have been here more than three weeks, and now must leave my May to go back to those who need me more, but I leave them with a sigh for I have learned to love little Audley dearly.

I weep when I remember that Clare and Howard are far away and may be for a year to come.

JULY.

Ada came back with me, and has begun to go out a little more with the rest into the gay scenes they frequent.

My last news from the absentees report them at Genoa, "and going towards Constantinople." Howard says: "Clare looks quite a new man already, and I intend throwing everything like a palette or brush into the briny deep, so have great hope of bringing him home as good as new some time or other."

Coralie wept bitter tears over the news of Marion's son, but they did her no good, as I had hoped, but seemed to make her only more gay and reckless, although I know she pines for that little coffin where she says, "her heart lies buried."

Lela's happiness seems farther off than ever, but she is still the gayest of the gay, and lives a nervous, excited life, for which I can see no remedy, and Gracie innocent little Gracie, is winning the only heart she loves, from her, and wears his flowers, and sings the songs he likes, with a simple girlish joy, which seems to please and soothe him. And he comes oftener, and bends over her, and apparently wishes for no other place. Oh Leanore, my proud Leanore, with all your matchless beauty and accomplishments, is this to be your fate, to pine and die perchance, for what shy little Gracie wears so carelessly.

Next month we are going to pay this dreaded visit to the Lamberts. Oh I wish it was over, it will be soon, if I can only have patience, but I forget to sometimes.

Our letters from home report all well, and prosperously progressing, but wondering when we ever mean to come back.

I wish I had all my flock safe housed again, but there is poor prospect of it now, so I must lay by the desire.

We have been abroad a year and a half already, but I hope ere the next year comes we will be safe at Percies' Cliffe.